

WWF goes over the line

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At what point does wrestling cross the line of allowable bad taste?

This question has been debated heavily within the profession this past week.

For the past several months, the World Wrestling Federation had pushed Sgt. Slaughter as a military turncoat siding with Iraq.

It was no coincidence that Slaughter's shot at WWF champ, the Ultimate Warrior, was coming just four days after the United Nations deadline for Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait. WWF promoter Vince McMahon felt that by making Slaughter his world champion this past Saturday night at the "Royal Rumble" pay-per-view show from Miami, he would set up the biggest moneymaking match in pro wrestling history. It would be Slaughter against a flag-cloaked Hulk Hogan amidst a patriotic orgy of 100,000 fans at the Los Angeles Coliseum in Wrestlemania VII on March 24.

But just a few days before the Rumble, reality got in the way. American blood had been shed in the Persian Gulf. Exploiting the war seemed to cross over the invisible line.

Many within the WWF front office feared a media backlash, and some privately considered quitting because McMahon refused to change his Wrestlemania plans. Even to the last day, his underlings tried to convince McMahon to allow Warrior to win, then either change or phase out the Slaughter character while pushing a different villain to headline Wrestlemania.

Because of the fear of a backlash, the WWF — during its syndicated television shows and Saturday's pay-per-view show — stated that its position was 100% patriotic and that it didn't condone Slaughter's character. During the pay-per-view show, there were continual mentions of support, wishing the best of luck for the troops abroad.

But in this case, the hypocrisy has gone too far. The WWF can claim not to condone the character, but it remains a fact that it was McMahon who created the turncoat Slaughter and decided to make him his world champion at the height of the hostilities. He was the one in charge of scripting Slaughter's interviews, giving the illusion that backstage, during the show, Slaughter was desecrating the American flag.

When negotiating to return to the WWF last summer, Slaughter originally balked at the anti-American villain role, but backed down when it became obvious it was the only way he could get a job with the WWF. Those close to him say that Slaughter, 42, realized his career was near its end and was looking for a front office position. To get it, he felt he needed to be 100% loyal to McMahon.

To further exploit the situation, the WWF wanted to send Hogan to Saudi Arabia to visit the troops, but was turned down by the USO. Instead, Hogan will spend the next few weeks visiting families of those overseas to strengthen his image, while vowing to win the title back from Saddam Hussein's minion.



GRUNT AND GRIN

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FOR THE NATIONAL

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